

The living chronicler and creator of Miami



BY: [MARTIN MÉSZÁROS OF NAVARRE](#)

"I'm Stramm!" says Tibor Holló, a Hungarian-born American real estate developer in his Florida East Coast Realty (FECR) office in Miami's Brickell neighborhood. A park in the Florida metropolis is named after the ninety-six-year-old businessman and visionary who is largely responsible for the current image of the metropolis.

Monday, early afternoon. I'm already gliding over downtown Miami to Brickell on the free-to-use Metromover public transport, which forms a transition between the Skytrain and the funicular, when I receive an email from the secretary of my interviewee, Budapest-born American real estate developer Tibor Holló:

"Unfortunately, something happened and Mr. Holló was forced to leave early. You can't receive it today. We are sorry for the inconvenience." I am about to get off at the next stop when my email account indicates another inbox: there must have been a misunderstanding, if I am really nearby, I should just go because Mr. Raven is waiting in his office.

Next year, with you, in the same place

A year has passed since I first visited Tibor Holló in the office of his real estate development company, Florida East Coast Realty (FECR), which he founded and managed, then located on Biscayne Avenue. The great old man of the real estate industry was already ninety-five years old, he went to work two – sometimes three times a week – and his company was preparing for more and more giga investments. The elderly CEO, who has been building his growing real estate empire with the involvement of his family members for a long time, told me in the most natural way in the world that he was planning to retire, but he didn't know exactly when he would retire because he wanted to build two buildings first. They will soon move out of the high-rise where we usually meet, the building will be demolished, and in its place will be built a complex called One Bayfront Plaza, which would also include a parking garage, a viewing point and a shopping center, he detailed in March and April last year.

I walk down from high above to the business-financial center named after William Brickell, one of the founders of the city, known for its high-rise buildings and skyscrapers, where it is easy to find the building at 1101 Brickell Avenue not only because it is less than five minutes from the stop, but also because it is located in a frequented part of the city. In the skyscraper, the security guard escorts me to the elevator, gets in with me, and then upstairs, after I exit, sinks the passenger elevator underneath. I stand in front of a pleasant, acceptably modern reception with the company name above it: Florida East Coast Realty. Tibor Holló, who everyone here refers to as Mr. Holló, founded six decades ago: since then, he has provided for the construction of an area of about six to seven million square meters, and his repertoire includes family houses, residential and business complexes, government buildings, ports, warehouse and telecommunications centers. "Throughout FECR's extensive history, the company has built, owned, and managed a wide range of properties in South Florida, New York, and Las Vegas," reads one prospectus.

I ask for directions from the first person I come across, and you can already guess from the wide smile that I am in the right place: Mr. Raven is already waiting for you, come! Miami's cloudy king sits at a desk full of documents, blueprints and notes, facing one of his children, Jerome Hollo, the company's co-CEO and general counsel. It really is as they said: the tidy, gray-haired company manager greets me not with old age, but with bursting enthusiasm.

After the obligatory – unplayed – courtesy rounds, I ask him what has happened to him in the last twelve months since we haven't seen each other. Am I right in seeing that you are still working and have no major health complaints? Did he really not retire and hand over the management of the company to his sons,

Wayne and Jerome? "We have planned a lot," he begins his reply. We speak English because his son sitting next to me doesn't speak Hungarian. "At the same time, we made some decisions about what to do: what to build and what to demolish. The move basically involved a lot of planning over the past year," he continues. As for the investments they have been working on since our last meeting, he gives a more exhaustive answer: "To meet the growing demand for wellness-focused living spaces, we have integrated health-focused services. The establishment of fitness centers and green spaces can be a buzzword for health-conscious individuals and families seeking convenient access to facilities, promoting sustainable living within our properties." He doesn't like to overexplain, but this strategic move can even affect the overall attractiveness of the company's developments, contributing to increasing market value and long-term profitability.

No tears shed

Florida East Coast Realty purchased the office building consisting of two glass-walled towers in 2009, which was then renovated and the eight-hundred-unit Panorama Tower luxury high-rise residential tower was built, as well as hotels, offices and other properties in the area. Here you can really feel like you're not in the same city as Little Havana or Little Haiti.

"Yes, we are in a very central location indeed, almost at the epicenter of the Brickell-Downtown area," says the elderly businessman. "It is especially important to me to be here in the heart of the city. That was the real stake of my choice." He hesitates a little and then continues, almost naturally: moreover, this level was available to him in the facility. So it's easy, I'd say friendly, but I'm listening. Still, it's not a good tactic because Raven isn't the squirming type. I have to ask you about the details of the move. "I was so excited about it!" he says enthusiastically. Good, excited, but what exactly did he feel: was he sad, maybe even emotional? "Not at all!" he says, and as if something is sitting on his face, so I don't stupid him, he's seen enough in ten decades. "I may have been a little emotional at one point, but if it really did, I didn't really perceive it," he explains.

The ninety-six-year-old company manager and head of the family with five children was born in Budapest, lived in Pest and Paris as a child, and then, being of Jewish origin, was deported to a concentration camp during World War II. He was imprisoned in Mauthausen-Gusen, Austria, with his father when liberated by the U.S. 11th Division on May 1945, 5. The most exciting phase of his life had only just begun: he left Europe on a difficult and adventurous journey, then returned to the continent and obtained a degree in architecture at the Technical University

of Paris, and then arrived in America at the age of twenty – with \$ 18 in his pocket, according to the tree – where he made himself in a few years. In San Francisco, he began his American dream as a lifeguard, and by 1956 he was already one of New York's most successful general contractors when he decided to move to Miami.

"I always have to remind myself that for many people who spend decades in an office, moving can be painful. However, this is not the case with us, because for us change means the beginning of a new project. So, it's not a bad thing at all, but on the other hand, we've been planning it for years, so we didn't make the decision overnight," he explains about the spiritual aspects of the move. Last year, he detailed his plans for One Bayfront Plaza and plans to create a smaller building at the same time. "What I can say is that the building where my office was located will probably be completely demolished before the end of the year," he says of the major investment he has spoken about several times over the past six years.





Miami álmos kisváros volt

Today, after Inner Downtown – following the Venetian Islands, the Upper East Side and the elegant Coconut Grove neighborhood – Brickell is the most expensive neighborhood to live in Miami; palm-lined skyscrapers draw here a picture of a humid but cozy seaside New York. "Brickell Avenue in the 1950s – and even our downtown area – was completely empty. Miami was a sleepy little town at the time. It hasn't exploded like it has in the last half century," says Mr. Raven, whom I just asked to reminisce about the bustling tourist paradise and melting pot of Cuban immigrants when he established himself here. "Brickell was unknown to people, but I felt that downtown could only expand here, not go back, towards Biscayne Avenue. Fortunately to sense this, I bought some properties on Brickell Avenue, which, again, did not exist at the time." I am amazed to hear the story: beneath us, cars, motorcycles, scooters, scooters arrive and go, buses meander, subway lines operate on the level of buildings – and yes, high-rise high-rises and skyscrapers with gleaming glass! There was a small building at the hospital, but nothing else actually stood where banks and restaurants are now at the foot of skyscrapers. At that time, no one had heard of Brickell Avenue, repeating his earlier words. "Me neither," he adds, there is no pseudo-modesty in his voice. "But then I saw the opportunity because it was the

natural continuation. I felt that if Miami ever expanded, as it has done over the decades, it could only be in the direction of Brickell."

The fact that he built the first high-rise on Brickell Avenue is not mentioned.

In the 1970s, privately owned properties gave way to office buildings and hotels on the avenue. When the TV series Miami Vice launched in '84, there was not only the famous tower of the Atlantis residential building that appeared in the opening scene, but also several well-known residential and office buildings in the neighborhood. Tibor Holló is not only a valuable chronicler of the past, his own oeuvre is so significant that the mayor of the combined city-county of Miami-Dade had already declared July 18 "Holló Tibor Day", and the week before we met this year, the city of Miami and Miami-Dade County honored him and his wife, Sheila, for their tireless work in rebuilding and transforming Brickell Avenue. The recognition is sensational: in Brickell, where it has been impossible to find undeveloped land for years, the city government established the "Tibor and Sheila Hollo Park" on an area of 3300 square meters, at the inauguration of which the legendary pioneer received not only Brickell's key, but also a mayor's proclamation, according to which May 1 is henceforth considered "Tibor and Sheila Raven Day" in the borough.

Apparently, this is such a year, because the second symposium of the Florida International University (FIU) called "React Real Estate Conference" awarded Tibor Holló with a lifetime achievement award a few months earlier. "Winning the React Conference Lifetime Achievement Award was an uplifting moment that reminded me of the tremendous support of the South Florida community. It's a powerful feedback that makes me want to continue living humbly and gratefully," she said of the ceremony where she was represented by her sons. (The doyen of the real estate industry is indeed modest and grateful: not only his wife, known as a philanthropist, is also often a philanthropist, supporting basically educational-cultural projects.)

Miami could beat New York

Although he still has some professional challenges ahead of him, I am curious to see how he sees the future of his beloved city. "Miami will probably be just as important as New York. If only it doesn't get more important! New Yorkers have regularly flooded Miami in recent years. Living conditions there... The taxation system... sudden subsidence of the earth's surface... And even the weather, because, right, it's very inhospitable in New York. While we bathe in the sun, they frolic in the snow!" He carefully articulates the last sentence, he wants me to

understand it for sure. Not only after he's done with it, he laughs politely at the same time. I ask about the weather, as summer temperatures in Miami are usually around 30 degrees with significant humidity, not to mention hurricane season and regular thunderstorms. My interlocutor does not hear the question. "And Latin Americans keep coming, this is their capital. The cultural offer is also getting richer," he lists. I don't have the heart to interrupt, but suddenly his son says, "To answer your question: no, it's not at all unbearable even in summer, it's actually a very temperate climate, because we're on the ocean, we get an easterly breeze. Coasts, unlike inland areas, generally have pleasant weather. There were summer times when it was much warmer in New York than it was here."

Mr. Raven approves, sipping water from his crystal glass, which is an essential accessory for his desk. I don't want to hold it up, I note. "He doesn't hold me up," he replies in Hungarian, adding, "I'm in the office today." I ask: how often do you go in? "I spend at least three days here. Monday, Wednesday and Friday, these are the days set in stone," he replies, switching back to English. "I usually arrive around nine o'clock and go home around three in the afternoon. That would be my daily routine. Of course, I have things to do at home during the day, but my routine is to leave home at three o'clock," he continues.

It's already past half-past four, but I'll quickly ask you what stage the biography you've been working on for months is in. "The book stays within the family," comes the objective answer. Messages and notifications come to his smartphone on the table, but my interlocutor doesn't even glance at him, he looks me in the eye like an old-fashioned gentleman. "I am extremely excited and honored to be publishing my first book soon. It will be a tangible representation of my life and I can't wait to share it," she adds with much more enthusiasm.

Now I'm really starting to get dizzy (I questioned him hard last year anyway, we both know), but we'll take another photo to say goodbye. "I'm Stramm!" he says, clenching his hands playfully into fists and shaking them theatrically when I ask him in Hungarian if he's really as well as he looks. They help him stand up, take photos, shake hands. Before I leave his office, I wish him all the best and success in building One Bayfront Plaza. He thanks, bows his head a little. I stagger around his desk for a few seconds. "Last time the papers said that once built, it would be the tallest building in Florida," I remind him in our common language. "Will it be built?" I ask. "Meg," he answers calmly, and I know he will.